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ABSTRACT

This document describes the principal's role in supervising a teacher mentoring program. It provides tips for guiding mentors and describes the characteristics of a good mentor. For example, mentors working with a novice should focus on three areas--the classroom, emotional support, and practical applications. Three styles of mentoring include acting as a responder, colleague, or initiator. Guidelines for pairing mentors with proteges are offered, which focus on recognizing these important characteristics of a good mentoring relationship: (1) similar values about achievement; (2) complementary skills and knowledge; (3) the mentor's experience level; (4) the mentor's willingness to share information; and (5) the willingness of both parties to listen and ask questions. In conclusion, mentoring involves many skills--knowing when and how to work with a new colleague, who should mentor, and how much mentoring is enough. The key, for the principal, is to act as a team builder and to maximize the mentor's effectiveness. (LMI)

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The Principal's Role in Mentoring

Janet T. Bercik

In Homer's epic poem, *The Odyssey*, Odysseus gave his loyal friend, Mentor, the responsibility of guiding, nurturing, and educating his son, Telemachus. Webster's defines "mentor" as a wise advisor, teacher, or coach. Today, mentoring refers primarily to an advisor coaching a colleague who is new to a specific profession or position. In education, mentors can be experienced teachers or principals working with novice teachers—a role which falls within the principal's function as a school's educational leader.

The Mentor's Role

The principal's role as first mentor can be vital. The better all parties understand the clearly defined roles and expectations of the process, the more successful the protégé's teaching career will be. A survey of experienced teachers (Bercik and Larsen 1990) found that they consider support very important. One stated, "The only thing which made the first year endurable was the constant help, affirmation, and friendship given to me by the teacher I worked most closely with. This person calmed me when I was about to go off the deep end, and had genuine suggestions on how to organize a classroom and teach." Experienced teachers also rated administrative support higher than staff support. Since principals are the first contacts teachers have within a school community, they are the first with whom relationships are forged.

While still doing student teaching, a beginner's university supervisor serves as a safety link and mentor, providing evaluation as well as a grade. During this period the cooperating school principal shares ongoing support and guidance, which establishes a beginning link in the mentoring process. When first hired, the novice tends to regard the principal as a mentor, but this changes as the question of formal evaluations occurs. At this point, the novice may not be certain who to trust. If a principal understands this early, and appoints an experienced teacher to serve as ongoing mentor, the beginning teacher will not flounder. A mentor becomes a source of support only when not seen as threatening or evaluative.

Since mentors act as role models, it is important that they be understanding and willing to expend time, energy, and support. While principals may not always have these luxuries, it is crucial that they understand the components. To ensure the novice's success, the principal must know the strengths of the staff when seeking a mentor for the beginning teacher.

Mentoring is more than a professional relationship. It is founded on the concept that a mentor works to aid an individual in becoming independent and successful once weaned of

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Guiding the Mentors

The mentoring process can involve student, beginning, and cooperating teachers. To understand the process, and to provide definitive guidelines for everyone concerned, one must examine the needs at all levels. Mentors working with a novice should concentrate their efforts in three critical areas: the classroom, emotional support, and practical applications.

Classroom Guidance

- **Provide knowledge about school policies and curriculum.**
- **Provide knowledge about student needs.**
- **Provide information about the community's educational expectations.**
- **Model techniques that are helpful with special-needs students.**
- **Encourage joint participation in grade-level planning activities.**
- **Invite participation in cross-grade and school planning activities.**
- **Impart your wisdom and expertise.**

Emotional Support

- **Give regular constructive feedback.**
- **Exhibit confidence and support for proteges' decisions.**
- **Make time to listen.**
- **Help find joint solutions to problems.**
- **Treat proteges as adults and partners.**
- **Support them in taking risks.**
- **Encourage them to be involved in activities outside of school. Remind them that all work and no play leads to stress.**

Practical Applications

- **Encourage joint research projects.**
- **Encourage them to join local teachers' organizations to broaden their growth and development.**
- **Encourage interactions with district and staff members.**
- **Tell them about the student body, faculty and community.**
- **Inform them about district rules and regulations.**

support. This happens only if the foundation is firm and parameters have been carefully delineated. The protégé must understand and accept guidance if the mentor is to be effective.

Characteristics of a Good Mentor

A mentor chosen by the principal must possess certain characteristics. Grippin's research on remodeling teacher education (1989) named four important characteristics:

- *minimum qualifications*—knowledge of subject matter, good communication skills, and peer respect;
- *effective instruction techniques*—classroom management skills, effective teaching and instructional techniques;
- *educational maturity*—reflective and analytic skills, self-development programs, and decision-making skills; and
- *extraordinary skills or service*—volunteering for responsibility and service within the school and specialized teacher training programs.

Mentors provide encouragement and emotional support for the novice, as well as information about district curricula. Their practical experiences and insight can supplement the beginner's skills. What is needed from each mentor will vary according to the new teacher's skills and confidence in the classroom. But there are limits to what a mentor can extend and what the mentored individual will accept. Leslie Huling-Austin (1990) called the mentoring process "a squishy business," and said it involved three styles: the responder, the colleague, and the initiator.

The *responder* only answers questions that the new teacher asks. We've all been in this role and understand the unspoken rule to assist only when asked. The reasoning, faulty or not, is that we don't want to make the new teacher uncomfortable. The respond-

PROFESSIONAL ADVISORY

This article is in support of the following standard from *Proficiencies for Principals, Revised* (NAESP 1991):

The principal must encourage staff participation in professional development activities.

...and this standard from *Standards for Quality Elementary & Middle Schools: Kindergarten through Eighth Grade, Revised* (NAESP 1990):

Staff development...includes preparing teachers to observe and coach one another on skills related to the goals of the school.

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ing mentor does a good job in assisting with specific problems, but fails to discuss the day-to-day issues.

The *colleague* goes one step further by asking the protégé about problems. For example, Jane, the teacher next door to Susan, tells her colleague that she is having a problem with discipline, and asks her to observe Jane's class during a free period. After the visit, they discuss the problem over lunch. By taking time to go beyond the expected, Susan has begun an ongoing, sharing relationship. Beginning teachers may not benefit from this type of mentoring because they have only minimal perceptions of effective teaching.

The *initiator* starts the ball rolling. From the outset the mentor accepts the responsibility of providing regular assistance, and promoting growth and confidence in the new teacher. From day one, Mary's mentor Ellen saw to it that Mary learned about the whole school. She discussed the community, Mary's future students, the curriculum, when tests were to be given, the time of lunch, how to obtain materials, and other issues critical to Mary's survival. Ellen endeavored to have Mary feel like a part of the staff by inviting her to join the teachers' organizations, the bowling league, and share in the Thank-Goodness-It's-Friday excursions. The only limitations in this style are the beginning teacher's willingness to participate and share in the expertise of the mentor.

Necessary Skills

Working with adults is seldom a breeze, because we are dealing with varied standards and behavioral styles. Interpersonal skills such as listening, patience, and understanding are imperative to mentoring. Mentors should try to remember their first teaching experiences and recall that the university's education courses did not provide all the answers they needed in that first year. Much of their knowledge came from experience gained on the job.

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What it Takes to Be a Mentor

Although mentoring is often an informal process, many schools and districts, and some states, have developed structured programs to assist beginning teachers, due to their high attrition rate in the profession. You may want to begin with an orientation workshop or a get-acquainted session, involving experienced and new teachers.

When pairing people, keep in mind some of the following important characteristics of a good mentoring relationship:

- **similar values about achievement,**
- **complementary skills and knowledge,**
- **the mentor's experience level,**
- **the mentor's willingness to share information, and**
- **willingness (by both parties) to listen/ask questions.**

Once the match has been made, the mentor should establish certain procedures to give structure to the process. These should include:

- **Setting a regular time to meet;**
- **Keeping a list of things to cover, including information sources;**
- **Spelling out frequently used acronyms—the protege may not know what "NAESP" means;**
- **Providing full names and titles of colleagues ("Dr. William Smith," not just "Bill Smith");**
- **Making sure from time to time that mentor and protege "speak the same language."**

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Principals should remind mentors that their role is to nurture, encourage, and stimulate creativity. They must understand that the support they provide may be accepted or denied. How they give encouragement will be the key to success. Principals can help all participants by meeting regularly with them, both as teams and as individuals, listening to their dialogue, and maintaining a constant flow of ideas and support. This team-building will lead not only to the novice's growth and development, but also to success in the school's environment.

Mentoring involves many variables—knowing when and how to work with a new colleague, who should mentor, and how much mentoring is enough. The answers must come from the personalities and needs of the people involved. No one mentoring style is the only correct one, and because mentors can play varied roles, their responsibilities must be clearly defined, allowing both mentors and protégés to be open to the give and take of educational dialogue. The key is to maximize the mentor's effect, thus leading to the beginning teacher's successful induction into the school's culture and the profession.

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